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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the significant literary activities observed in the teaching of reading in an inner-London (England) primary school in a reception and year four class. Efforts at achieving a high level of literacy for all students are hampered by: (1) low parental literacy input and involvement in school; (2) continuous disruptive behavior from a minority of children; (3) an inconsistency across the staff in carrying through the carefully constructed language policy; (4) large class size; (5) cuts in support staff; and (6) meeting the demands of the National Curriculum. Children's early experience of story is critical to their success in literacy at school. Teachers can serve the needs of their students by reading more books and reading more often to their classes. Picture books, storytelling and rhymes are particularly captivating for children and can encourage them to become more interested in reading and increase their literacy level. (SWC)

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Sustaining the Vision: How Can We Ever Have Literacy for All?

by
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Here is an extract from a recent OFSTED inspection report of an inner-London primary school on their teaching of reading.

> "Standards of reading are average to poor. A minority of pupils read well, and some, very well. The use of reading times in and out of class is not always appropriate for the encouragement of fluency and accuracy. Most pupils enjoy stories and respond to the texts, but the consistent use of a range of strategies for teaching and learning reading is not apparent and the organization of reading activities not sufficient to enable pupils to develop independence. The teaching of library, study and reference skills is inadequate."

I have been observing the teaching of reading in this school each week for the past five months. In the appendix, you can read detailed accounts from my notebook of work in reading and writing in a reception and a year 4 class. I describe below other significant literacy activities that I have observed.

In the Reception Class

* The class share books and other reading matter, including newspapers, for some twenty minutes after lunch on the carpet area
* The carpet area doubles as the reading corner and the children are surrounded by racks and boxes of books and by inviting notices to "Come and Chose a Book to Read'"and "Which Is Your Favorite Book?' or "Tell a Friend About the Book You Have Read." Each notice is accompanied by miniature color photographs of book covers.
* R.,the teacher, often links one book read with another, so she may read *A Dark, Dark Tale* by Ruth Brown after *In a Dark, Dark Wood* (Story Chest) and ask the class to spot the differences. Pat Hutchin's *Titch* may remind the class of *Jasper's Beanstalk* (Nick Butterworth) and *Grace and her Family (*Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch) is read because the class enjoyed "Amazing Grace" so much.
* R. pushes her pupils to deepen their analysis of character. Whilst reading *Titch*, she asks, "Are Titch's brother and sister really mean or perhaps a bit thoughtless?"
* With more demanding stories, R. stops to summarize the story so far. So, in Grace and her Emily, she helps them with: "Grace is really missing her father, isn't she? And in stories, it's always the youngest who is the favorite. Now that Grace's Dad is married again, she won't be the youngest any more."
* R. always places books she has read in the reading basket for the children to reread.
* R. sets up group reading with four or five children in which detailed work on e.g. left to right orientation, one-to-one matching, commenting on illustration, prediction, text-to-life connections are made. Several copies of the same text are available e.g. *Our Cat Flossie* (Ruth Brown) and *The Whales' Song* (Dyan Sheldon and Gary Blythe).
* R. and the class create impromptu stories, e. g. around a robot which a non-English speaking child has made.
* R. models the writing process on a flip chart, varying the genre, e. g. a letter, a list of how all their shoes do up (for later work on sets), poems with a repeating structure. There are lots of rereading of the text and emphasis on the varying layouts.
  *R. frequently scribes isolated words for the class, e. g. delicious, mammoth, sounding them out and indicating how spellings may be checked.
* In the writing area of the classroom, the children are surrounded with suggestions ('write a letter or a card') and materials for writing (addresses, envelopes, a "zigzag" card of children's writing) and a computer with such programs as *Animated Alphabet*. They write on alphabet mats.

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* Children's independent writing is often later shared with the whole class when R. will indicate what the child knows about writing, e. g. "In Jigna's writing, we can see lines of writing and words she knows like her own name."
* R. capitalizes on school visits. Photographs of a visit to a city farm are given captions by the children and made into a class book. As children write or dictate, attention is drawn to letters and sounds. Children are commended for: differentiating writing from drawing, letter-like strokes, successful initial letter representation and retrieval of wanted words from the word bank. Speech bubbles encourage children to record direct speech and to think about spacing
* R. and her class mount many displays that derive from books read. *The Whales' Song* has prompted a display of fiction and nonfiction books about whales, a collection of shells and a class book of the many extra presents the class would give the whales to encourage them to sing.

*R. frequently praises the class and individuals for the "hard thinking" they put into their worke. g. a child is commended for saying the word "cake" to herself time and time again as she tries to write it. Neat presentation is always commended.

In the Year 4 class

* D. ensures that texts chosen for reading to the class are varied, illustrated and unillustrated, brand new and old classics, nonsexist and nonracist. Often his introductions will stress the positive reasons for his choice.
* During and after reading to the class, D. invites prediction, welcomes reference to related experiences and at the end allows discussions on questions which the children have raised, e. g. "What happens to his mum after the end of the story?" He frequently asks the children to reflect on characters' feelings and motivation
* D. often dwells on language choices made by authors, e. g. he savors the sentence, "A yellow light tickles the clouds,"or he explains expressions such as "put paid to."
* The children have reading partners with whom they are encouraged to share discussions similar to those conducted by D. with the whole class. With these partners, book reviews, letters and other pieces of writing may be shared.
* D. understands that children develop favorite authors and thus ensures that as many books as possible by the same author/illus-trator are available. Tony Ross and Jill Murphy books are very popular currently.
* The listening corner is drawn to children's attention and is frequently occupied by children plugged into the tape recorder.
* D. gives children specific help when choosing books for reading, including attending to such details as the type size, the length of the book, the pictures, the style. He hopes, in this way, to reduce excessive changing of books during the silent reading time.
* D. works with individual readers on a regular basis, having decided on the particular area on which he needs to concentrate. With one child it may be a discussion of how episodes are linked, with another the role of speech marks, with another an appreciation of irony.
* Less experienced readers have time with a support teacher to create games derived from books read, e. g. *Oi! Get Off Our Train!* (John Burningham)
* Work on information texts often takes the form of children carrying out the book's instructions, realizing the shortcomings and re-writing improved versions. Information books are read widely, particularly by boys, in silent reading times.
* Children are always sent home with their book folders and a reminder to see if an even higher target of '"returns, book read" the next day can be reached.
* D. reads from texts to stimulate writing ideas, e. g. he reads from *The Iron Woman* but omits the description of the creature from the swamp, inviting the children to supply the details. (He had also concealed the cover picture.)
* D. frequently provides a clear sense of audience for the children's writing, such as writing letters of thanks to a visiting theater company, compiling autobiographies, etc.
* D. recognizes that the chance to draw or illustrate in some way frees some otherwise writing-inhibited children.

* D. puts emphasis on prior planning and on drafting. Help is given to improve presentation for the finished versions.
* Class books are frequently made and display children's final pieces, double mounted and beautifully captioned.

* D. uses the flip chart for several pur-poses, including children's suggested vocabulary ideas, their opening sentences for stories or accounts, lists, etc.
* D. frequently writes alongside the children on the same task as he has set them. He is aware of how his and other helper's writing provides impetus to the children.
* D. builds in sharing time when pupils can read their writing to the rest of the class and receive advice and encouragement. Only constructive criticisms are allowed.
* D. praises both individuals and the class when concentration has been good. He reminds them of past achievements.

Now look back at the OFSTED conclusions about the teaching of reading in this school. If you were one of those two teachers whose classrooms I have described, would you not want to throw in the towel?

Yet these teachers know that there is some truth in what the inspectors have said, and they worry that their best efforts do not achieve high levels of literacy for all. Their own explanations center on:

* low parental literacy input and involve-ment in school
* continuous disruptive behavior from a minority of children
* an inconsistency across the staff, in carrying through the carefully constructed language policy - perhaps
* large class sizes
* cuts in support staff
* meeting the demands of the National Curriculum.

Time restricts my examining all of these in detail but I should like to comment on the first three, leaving the last three to be acknowledged but not explored.

When I tell you that the school I have been visiting is in one of the poorest areas of London, you may feel that the teachers have got a point in their mentioning the parental aspect. Many people would go no further in seeking ex-planations. Mike Lake, Senior Educational Psychologist for Buckinghamshire, claimed in "Language and Learning" 6 (1991), that "it certainly looks as though any deterioration in reading is more connected with worsening background factors than with faulty teaching." His carefully reasoned article, in the wake of another psychologist's polemical pamphlet which had attacked teaching methods, indicates a link between increasing levels of poverty and declining reading standards with teaching method having a negligible influence on results. Until more optimism returns to the inner city, some would argue, there is unlikely to be any improvement in literacy levels or in education levels generally. To leave the answer at that, however, is to leave us in a powerless state of despair and certainly to leave me without a paper.

The disruptive behavior mentioned by the teachers certainly counts for a great deal of teacher time. I have tried to record the interruptions and "discipline exchanges" during my observations: they are numerous, distracting and soul destroying for the teachers. I believe that these teachers have developed every discipline strategy in the book and apply them diligently. Yet children still call out of turn, complain loudly if they cannot do what they want or have the book that they want. In the reception class, they hit each other and spoil work. These teachers are enormously skilled at anticipating and defusing situations, yet some children learn to become pupils very slowly if at all.

Consistent application of the language policy is a very tricky area for all schools. This school has developed its policy collaboratively which should eliminate problems, but even in a relatively open-plan school with lots of team work, it is possible that there are teachers who, deep down, believe, for instance, that silent reading time is wasted time or that sending books home which don't get read is pointless. The consequent loss of theoretical and practical cohesion must be damaging to children's progress. It is often said that any policy, if applied consistently, works; I'm not totally sure about that, but it may well be that this school would see improvement if it could

only ensure application across the board of its philosophies and practices.

Class size, cuts in staffing and budgets and National Curriculum demands are going to be with us for some time; maybe forever. There is no doubt that the teaching approaches I have described above, which are, themselves, N.C. approved, depend upon manageable group size. Over thirty, and conferences with individual children, whole class discussions, making class books, monitoring progress all become, with much else, an administrative challenge which few of us could meet. Helpers, bilingual support teachers, and parents all can relieve the problems created by large classes; their absence makes progress for every child much harder to ensure. The sheer volume of content teaching required by the National Curriculum not to mention the emphasis on record keeping, assessment and testing also leaves many teachers doubtful of their ability to keep the literacy needs of their classes always at the forefront of their minds.

My closing, tentative comments are confined to classroom practice, an area where we, as teachers, have some control. Before I make any suggestions, I need to repeat that the teachers I have observed are enormously impressive. Nothing that I mention can detract from their efforts. I firmly believe that were they teaching in a comfortable middle class area their results would be praised to the skies by OFSTED inspectors.

We know from the research of Margaret Clark (*Young Fluent Readers*, 1976), of Gordon Wells (*The Meaning Makers*, 1986), of Stephen Krashen (*The Power of Reading*, 1993) and of Carol Fox (*At The Very Edge of the Forest*, 1993), that children's early experience of story is critical to their success in literacy at school. Shirley Brice-Heath (*Ways with Words*, 1984) delivers similar messages about the literacy events which make a difference. Can we hold onto the powerful finding in all this research--that storying is "a primary act of mind" (Barbara Hardy) and "that children, at the beginning, have to make narrative do for all" (James Moffatt) and put reading even more centrally into these classrooms than these gifted teachers already do? In practice, this would mean that story time happened several more times a day than it does currently. Remember Gordon Wells' finding that "Jonathan" had heard 6,000 stories by the time he went to school compared with "Rosie" who had heard none. Teachers can never make up such a gap, but they serve their pupils' needs by reading much more and more often to their classes.

Where will the time come from? A tough suggestion and one that I make nervously would be that we may need to reconsider those discussion sessions which are so much part of current practice, supported as they are by well-researched reader response theory. The belief in the importance of talk and of "making it one's own." But until children have been exposed to a sufficient number of stories maybe much of this well-intentioned discussion goes over their heads. We all know how children can easily be switched off by too much teacher intervention and agendas not of their own initiating, and indeed there is a contrast in the classroom between the complete attention given to a reading compared to the distraction evident in discussion times in a large number of children. It is particularly noticeable that it is often an essentially simple but multilayered picture book that holds the class most spellbound. In the Year 4 class, *White Rabbit's Color Book* by Alan Baker was asked for again and again. Jill Murphy and Tony Ross, John Burningham, Ruth Brown, Colin McNaughton and Alan Ahlberg were really important to them. That these eight and nine year olds are hungry for these books may be initially shocking but they are telling us something: "We need these stories now because we didn't have them before."

They are also hungry for storytelling. It cannot be insignificant that all our students report magical long attention spans, total delight and demands for more when they have finally found the courage to *tell* a story. Busy teachers find learning stories to tell an extra task, but it becomes easier the more one does it. Response is hugely encouraging and as the children's store of tales increases so their entry into written text becomes more willing and competent. The Ahlbergs are popular; if one recognizes the references to folk tales and rhymes, they are much more satisfying. All of us can increase our store of traditional tales and give children evidence of what the struggle is all about: entry into a secondary world which miraculously can be revisited in ones head any time.

Finally, we need to recognize children's delight in rhyme even more. The evidence is there--in the crib, in the playground, in song--just as it is in the appetite shown by children for story. Children need rhyme and rhythm. We need to bring rhyme into the classroom, not only because of increased phonemic awareness, important though that is, but because children are telling us that they need it. Like story, they can carry it around with them wherever they go and inspect it for what it teaches them and because it pleases them.

If I am concluding that these very good teachers should enjoy themselves more and work less hard to push their pupils towards sophisticated responses, it is not because I want them to lose ambition for their pupils and lower their standards. It is because experiences with literature need to be multiple and multiplied, patterns laid down by repeated exposure and literature trusted to do its own work. If teachers enjoy reading aloud--and none of us should teach unless we do--they should do as much of it as possible. They should tell stories and sing songs and chant poetry and watch the literacy level rise. I make these suggestions humbly but I believe that children show us that they want and need these things, above all else, in their pursuit of literacy.